

Characterizing Rural Settlement and Landscape: Whittlewood Forest in the Middle Ages

By RICHARD JONES *and* MARK PAGE

THIS PAPER examines a sample area of countryside in Midland England and seeks to explain the medieval pattern of settlement and landscape in terms of the classifications devised by previous scholars. The physical environment of the area and its development before A.D. 400 shared many of the characteristics of the wider region. In the Middle Ages, however, as woodland regenerated, the area assumed a hybrid character, adopting some of the features of woodland societies together with others distinctive of the arable or 'champion' countryside surrounding it. The paper demonstrates the mix of settlement and landscape types in the area and illustrates the utility of the concept of pays.

Many attempts have been made to classify the complex patterns of historic settlement and landscape in Britain and Europe, by archaeologists, geographers and historians. In some cases broad distinctions have been drawn, such as that which emphasized the influence of geology and the natural environment on settlement, or that which contrasted regions of nucleated villages and modern enclosure with those of dispersed settlement and old enclosure.¹ Other classifications have sought to take more account of small-scale local variations and the cultural landscape. The division of England into farming regions, for instance, revealed a patchwork of different land use and social structure, while a similar characterization divided the country into eight categories of countryside or *pays*.² Some of these ideas have been refined over the years. Thus, the areas of nucleated and dispersed settlement have been redefined, based on the character of rural settlement in the 19th century.³ Another classification scheme has emphasized the cultural differences between regions divided by major river valleys and watersheds.⁴

In dividing a country such as England into a number of distinct zones, regions, provinces or *pays*, lines of demarcation have to be drawn, both spatially and

¹ C. Fox, *The Personality of Britain* (Cardiff, 1932); O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London, 1986).

² J. Thirsk, 'The farming regions of England', 1–112 in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: IV, 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967); A. Everitt, 'Country, county and town: patterns of regional evolution in England', *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., 29 (1979), 79–108 at pp. 84–5.

³ B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England* (London, 2000).

⁴ C. Phythian-Adams, 'Introduction: an agenda for English local history', 1–23 in C. Phythian-Adams (ed.), *Societies, Cultures and Kinship: 1580–1850. Cultural Provinces in English Local History* (Leicester, 1993).

chronologically, on the basis of particular characteristics or criteria. This can be problematic. Clearly, the more limited the time-period under review or the set of features being examined, the easier it will be to determine the geographical boundaries of different territories. By contrast, the more sophisticated the enquiry becomes, the more difficult will be the definition of specific areas of countryside. Boundaries will become blurred and the number of exceptions to the general rule will increase. There is often an assumption, however, that particular areas of England have distinctive characteristics — such as the Feldon and Arden districts of Warwickshire — which can be classified and contrasted with those of others. But is this necessarily the case? What about those areas of the country which appear to possess no unifying features, which lie on the borders between one type of countryside and another, and fit neither very well? What is the explanation for the development of areas of settlement and landscape which combine features normally associated with markedly different regions, provinces and *pays*?

This paper explores the difficulties of characterizing rural settlement and landscape at the local level by examining a sample area of countryside which for a number of reasons might be considered hybrid or anomalous. The area in question formed part of a royal forest in the Middle Ages, was heavily wooded at the time of Domesday Book and in the 13th century, but lay within a region of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire usually characterized as champion.⁵ Some of the characteristics of champion country were certainly in evidence in the forest, such as common fields, strong lordship, and peasants holding customary tenements consisting of virgates and half-virgates. On the other hand, the dominance of nucleated settlement nearby, for instance immediately south of the forest within the Vale of Aylesbury, or north towards Daventry and Northampton, was not reflected in the area, which was characterized rather by a significant degree of dispersal. A number of the inhabitants, moreover, made their living not from agriculture but by exploiting the resources of the abundant woodland and pasture.⁶ The paper seeks to identify the forces which influenced the pattern of settlement and landscape in this area, and to explain why some of the characteristics usually associated with champion and woodland country were present while others cannot be discerned.

THE PROJECT AREA

The focus of this paper is the former royal forest of Whittlewood which, at its greatest extent in the late 12th and 13th centuries, occupied an area of northern Buckinghamshire and south-western Northamptonshire which extended westwards from the encircling rivers of the Great Ouse and Tove almost to the border with Oxfordshire.⁷ Particular attention will be paid to a contiguous group of twelve modern civil parishes covering about 100 sq km of countryside close to the eastern

⁵ C. Lewis, P. Mitchell-Fox and C. Dyer, *Village, Hamlet and Field: Changing Settlements in Central England* (2nd ed., Macclesfield, 2001), 39–40 and 140–2.

⁶ G. Foard, 'Medieval woodland, agriculture and industry in Rockingham Forest, Northamptonshire', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 45 (2001), 41–95 at pp. 93–4.

⁷ Foard, *op. cit.* in note 6, 42.

edge of the forest on both sides of the county boundary (Fig. 1).⁸ Six of the parishes today lie in Buckinghamshire: Akeley, Leckhampstead, Lillingstone Dayrell, Lillingstone Lovell, Luffield Abbey and Stowe. The remainder lie in Northamptonshire: Deanshanger, Old Stratford, Potterspury, Silverstone, Whittlebury and Wicken. This area was carefully chosen because it contains both nucleated and dispersed settlement forms, is extensive enough to set these settlements within their broader landscape context, and provides the opportunity for comparative study of neighbouring communities. The area includes medieval settlements whose subsequent history is diverse, ranging from surviving villages to shrunken and deserted settlements. Furthermore, good evidence for the late prehistoric and Roman periods allows medieval settlement and landscape development to be set in a longer chronological framework.⁹

The project area lies to the north of the valley of the Great Ouse, on the oolitic limestone formations which characterize much of central Northamptonshire. Within the study zone, these rocks are generally overlain with glacial boulder clay, producing soil which is fertile but heavy and difficult to work, and providing the raw materials for pottery production.¹⁰ The limestone beds have, however, been revealed in places by the action of tributary streams of the Great Ouse and Tove which have carved narrow valleys through the boulder clay. This underlying stone provides ideal building material for the valley-based settlements, such as Wicken, Lillingstone Lovell and Silverstone, where the stone is still used in building today. Away from these limestone beds, the materials used in vernacular buildings are more varied, although local limestone was the predominant material used in the construction of the parish churches of the area. The alluvial flood plains of the two rivers provided light and fertile soils perfect for tilling, while within the principal valleys and along the secondary streams meadows provided a source of winter animal fodder. Finally, woodlands occupied the claylands, although these appear largely to have been limited to the upper and mid-slopes of the Great Ouse/Tove watershed.

There is thus little to distinguish the physical environment of Whittlewood from large parts of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire and northern Bedfordshire where boulder clays overlie Middle Lias and Cornbrash beds. The area has much in common with the southern parts of the Northamptonshire Heights to the north and west, and Bromswold to the north-east. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that Whittlewood Forest constitutes a unique physical *pays*, and certainly the twelve parishes under investigation cannot be characterized in this way. Although the southern extent of the forest follows the Great Ouse which marks the interface between the limestone beds to the north and the Oxford clays to the south which

⁸ C. Dyer, 'The Whittlewood project', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report*, 14 (1999), 16–17; M. Page and R. Jones, 'The Whittlewood project interim report 2000–1', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report*, 15 (2000), 10–18; R. Jones and M. Page, 'Medieval settlements and landscapes in the Whittlewood area: interim report 2001–2', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report*, 16 (2001), 15–25.

⁹ C. Lewis and P. Mitchell-Fox, 'The Leverhulme medieval settlement and landscapes project: report on site selection for future fieldwork in the East Midlands', *Medieval Settlement Research Group Annual Report*, 8 (1993), 27–35.

¹⁰ Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 39–40; A. Wainwright, 'Fallow deer park: excavation of a pottery kiln north of Stowe School sports ground', *Stowe Archaeol. Rep.*, 45 (1990); D. C. Mynard, 'Medieval pottery of Potterspury type', *Bullet. Northamptonshire Fed. Archaeol. Soc.*, 4 (1970), 49–55.

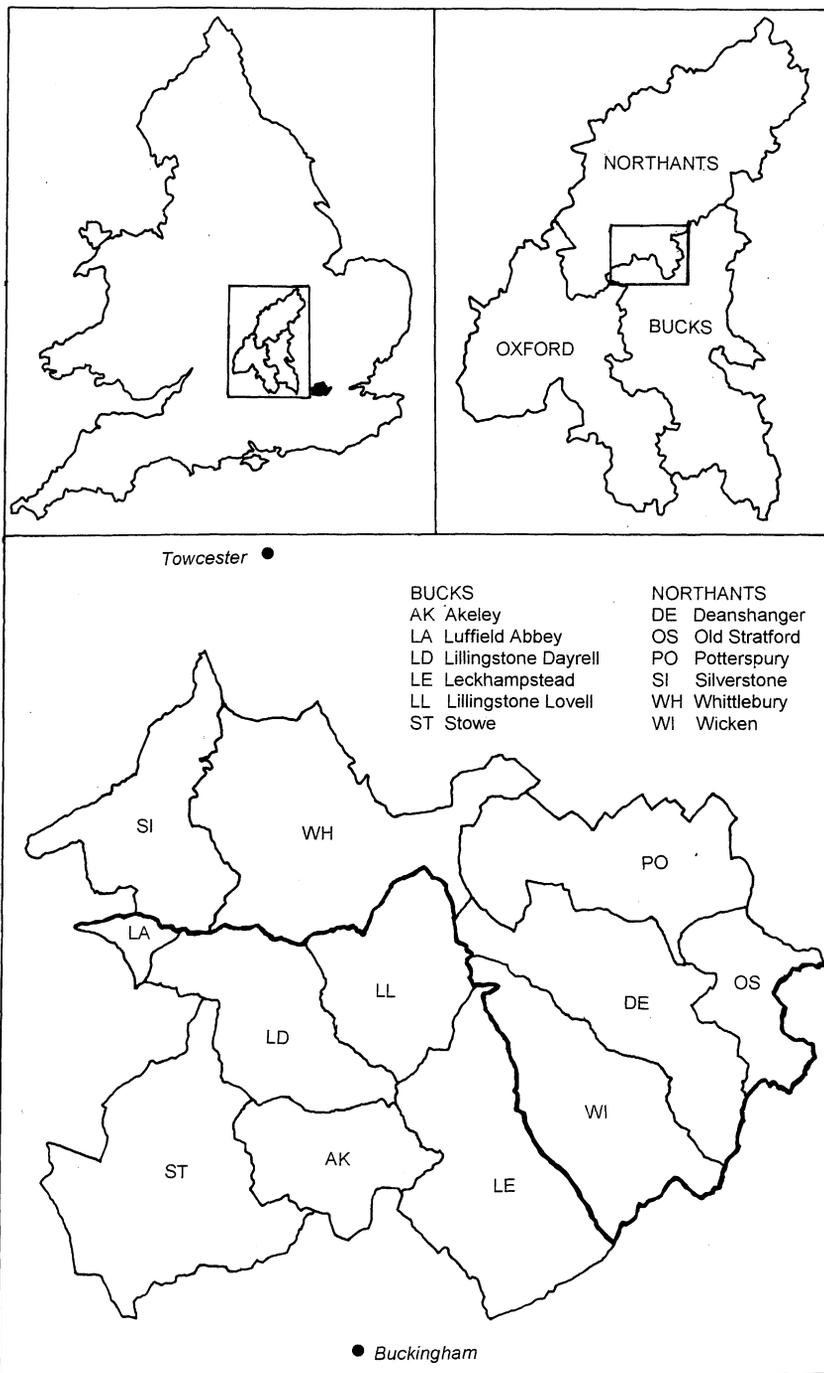


FIG. 1

Location of Whittlewood Forest project area.

dominate the Vale of Aylesbury, underlying geology appears to have played little part in determining the location of these forest areas; the medieval forests of Whittlewood, Salcey and Rockingham all lie on the limestones and boulder clays north of the Great Ouse, while the forests of Shotover and Bernwood lie on the Oxford clays to the south.¹¹ That the settlements of the project area differ so markedly from those of other areas with similar physical characteristics suggests that factors other than the purely geological shaped its development through the medieval and into the modern period.

LANDSCAPE EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION

There are well-known problems in first reconstructing and then characterizing rural landscape and settlement in the medieval period, caused principally by significant innovation in agricultural practices and new forms of settlement, although changes were rarely made rapidly; landscapes tended to evolve slowly over time as a result of varied human decision-making. Some landscape elements were inherited and retained, while others were subtly metamorphosed to suit contemporary requirements. Only occasionally were new elements imposed with little regard for what had gone before and rarely did even they totally obliterate more ancient features. The medieval period can be characterized as one of evolution, both in terms of landscape and settlement. But this evolution was neither simple nor linear, but complex and multi-directional. Neighbouring blocks of countryside could develop along entirely different lines, while two areas divided by great distance might develop in parallel, the realization which has given rise to the useful concept of *pays*.¹²

Within this evolutionary continuum, however, certain areas of Britain and Europe appear to have been subject to rapid and wholesale reorganization at critical moments in their history. Evidence points, for instance, to territorial reorganization in the Iron Age while later Roman centuriation on the continent profoundly affected large blocks of countryside. In England, Parliamentary enclosure in the late 18th and 19th centuries produced in many areas a new and regular landscape of geometric fields and straightened roads, imposed sometimes with little regard for antecedent arrangements. Finally, it has been argued that large parts of central and lowland England, the so-called Central Province,¹³ experienced a comparable, if not greater, settlement and landscape revolution during the medieval period. This has been variously labelled the 'great replanning' or the 'village moment'. Both specifically refer to the shift from a largely dispersed pattern of settlement towards nucleation, together with the associated adoption of a system of large, unenclosed fields farmed in common, replacing a mosaic of smaller fields farmed in severalty.

¹¹ Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 33–42.

¹² E.g. H. S. A. Fox, 'The people of the wolds in English settlement history', 77–101 in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer (eds.), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England: Studies Dedicated to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst* (Oxford, 1989); C. Dyer, 'Rural settlements in medieval Warwickshire', *Trans. Birmingham Warwickshire Archaeol. Soc.*, 100 (1996), 117–32.

¹³ Roberts and Wrathmell, *op. cit.* in note 3, 2.

The two hypotheses, however, propose very different mechanics behind the changes. For Brown, Foard and Hall, working on the Northamptonshire evidence, the 'great replanning' took place in the 'Late Saxon' period, as increasing manorialization saw the abandonment of settlements of free tenants.¹⁴ This process was encouraged still further by the fragmentation of the great estates as new manors were created. Only where the great royal estates persisted, retaining secondary settlements of free tenants with specific estate functions, were the centralizing forces of manorialization resisted and the settlement pattern remained dispersed. Furthermore, the adoption of open fields over the whole territory of these new manors or townships acted as a barrier to new settlement creation and petrified the resultant nucleated settlement pattern. A process which began in the 9th century, they argue, was largely complete by the 10th.

For Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, however, the 'village moment' should be seen as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary development, a process which took four centuries to reach maturity.¹⁵ While the reasons for nucleation and the creation of open fields remain obscure — the lack of available land, soil exhaustion, disputes over land and access, the need to preserve pasture, increasing market opportunities with the growing urban centres, recession and population collapse, and growing state demands such as military service have all been posited as possible contributory factors — it is clear to them that the process was underway by the mid-9th century and continued into the 13th. It is likely to have begun in those areas most suited to arable production and spread by imitation as the benefits of the new regime were recognized by neighbouring communities. For some communities, the process of nucleation may have taken many decades, the result of individual decision-making, as isolated farms were abandoned in favour of holdings nearer to others, or arrived at through a series of intermediate replannings. For other communities, however, there remains the possibility that restructuring took place in a single year involving the total redesign of the landscape and the construction of new properties in the central settlement. In the unique case of the northern counties, for instance, it has been suggested that the great harrying of 1067–8 created the *tabula rasa* on to which a new and planned form of village could be imposed.¹⁶

It is within the ambit of these two hypotheses, and with the model of *pays* creation in mind, that the characterization of Whittlewood must begin. However, the changing face of landscape and settlement over the period in question poses its own difficulties since characterizing the dynamic is far more problematic than characterizing the static. To overcome these complications it is proposed here not to characterize the whole period, but to aim to break it down into its constituent parts, to characterize the landscape and its settlements at a number of chronological horizons, and by so doing, reveal the processes by which these changes took place. A number of archaeological fieldwork techniques have been deployed to achieve

¹⁴ T. Brown and G. Foard, 'The Saxon landscape: a regional perspective', 67–94 in P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds.), *The Archaeology of Landscape: Studies Presented to Christopher Taylor* (Manchester, 1998); D. Hall, *The Open Fields of Northamptonshire* (Northamptonshire Record Soc., 38, 1995), 130–1.

¹⁵ Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 191–204.

¹⁶ D. M. Palliser, 'Domesday Book and the "Harrying of the North"', *Northern History*, 29 (1993), 5–7.

this end. Landscape reconstruction relies heavily on the recovery and plotting of ceramic evidence from systematic fieldwalking (15-m line interval, 20-m stint collection). In contrast, a combination of earthwork survey, geophysical survey and the excavation of large numbers of test-pits (1 sq m) in and around several modern villages has provided the evidence, again largely in the form of ceramic assemblages, to allow hypothetical models to be constructed for the origins and development of these principal settlements. Furthermore, documentary research is employed to substantiate and supplement the ideas generated by the archaeological findings.

IRON-AGE AND ROMAN SETTLEMENT AND LANDSCAPE

Although we do not know precisely the territorial arrangements of the Iron Age, Whittlewood almost certainly lay at the north-western corner of the territory of the Catuvellauni.¹⁷ Limited archaeological evidence suggests that the whole area was exploited during this period, with occupation within the valleys and on the clay-dominated watersheds (Fig. 2). In Whittlebury, for example, two small enclosures are known, together with a small Early to Middle Iron-age settlement covering approximately 20 ha.¹⁸ In Deanshanger and Potterspury finds of Iron-age pottery indicate occupation.¹⁹ All five sites are located in areas of later medieval woodland, implying that the landscape at this early period was very different from later phases.²⁰

By A.D. 50, Whittlewood had been brought under Roman military control.²¹ An early impact of the Roman occupation was the construction of Watling Street. More significantly, a post station was established at Towcester (*Lactodorum*). Towcester was fortified early in the 3rd century and appears to have prospered thereafter; indeed, extra-mural occupation and industrial activity has been found along Watling Street and the roads to Brackley and Alchester.²² This last road ran through the middle of Whittlewood and was established by the last quarter of the 1st century.²³ The convergence of the Alchester road and Watling Street at Towcester must have formed the backbone of a more complex system of minor roads serving the numerous settlements within the project area.

Several villa sites lie in and around the Whittlewood area.²⁴ At its southern extent are the river-based villas of Cosgrove, Deanshanger and Foscoote, while in the central clayland zone, and close to Watling Street, villas have been excavated

¹⁷ B. Jones and D. Mattingly, *An Atlas of Roman Britain* (London, 1990), 45, 50–1.

¹⁸ RCHM(E), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Northampton. IV: Archaeological Sites in South-West Northamptonshire* (London, 1982), 168.

¹⁹ RCHM(E), op. cit. in note 18, 41 and 118.

²⁰ Finds of low-density scatters of worked flint of neolithic and Bronze-age date on many of the fields within the project area might suggest that the landscape of Whittlewood had been cleared of large areas of woodland well before the Iron Age.

²¹ Jones and Mattingly, op. cit. in note 17, 66–7.

²² A. Brown, C. Woodfield and D. Mynard, 'Excavations at Towcester, Northamptonshire: the Alchester Road suburb', *Northamptonshire Archaeol.*, 18 (1983), 43–140; RCHM(E), op. cit. in note 18, 154–6.

²³ RCHM(E), op. cit. in note 18, 151.

²⁴ In the following discussion site labels follow those proposed in J. Hunn, *Reconstruction and Measurement of Landscape Change: A Study of Six Parishes in the St Albans Area* (BAR British Ser., 236, Oxford, 1994), 44. Thus, Romanized farmsteads are identified by the presence of building materials such as tiles and mortar as well as large quantities of Romano-British pottery, while native sites are those which produce pottery only.

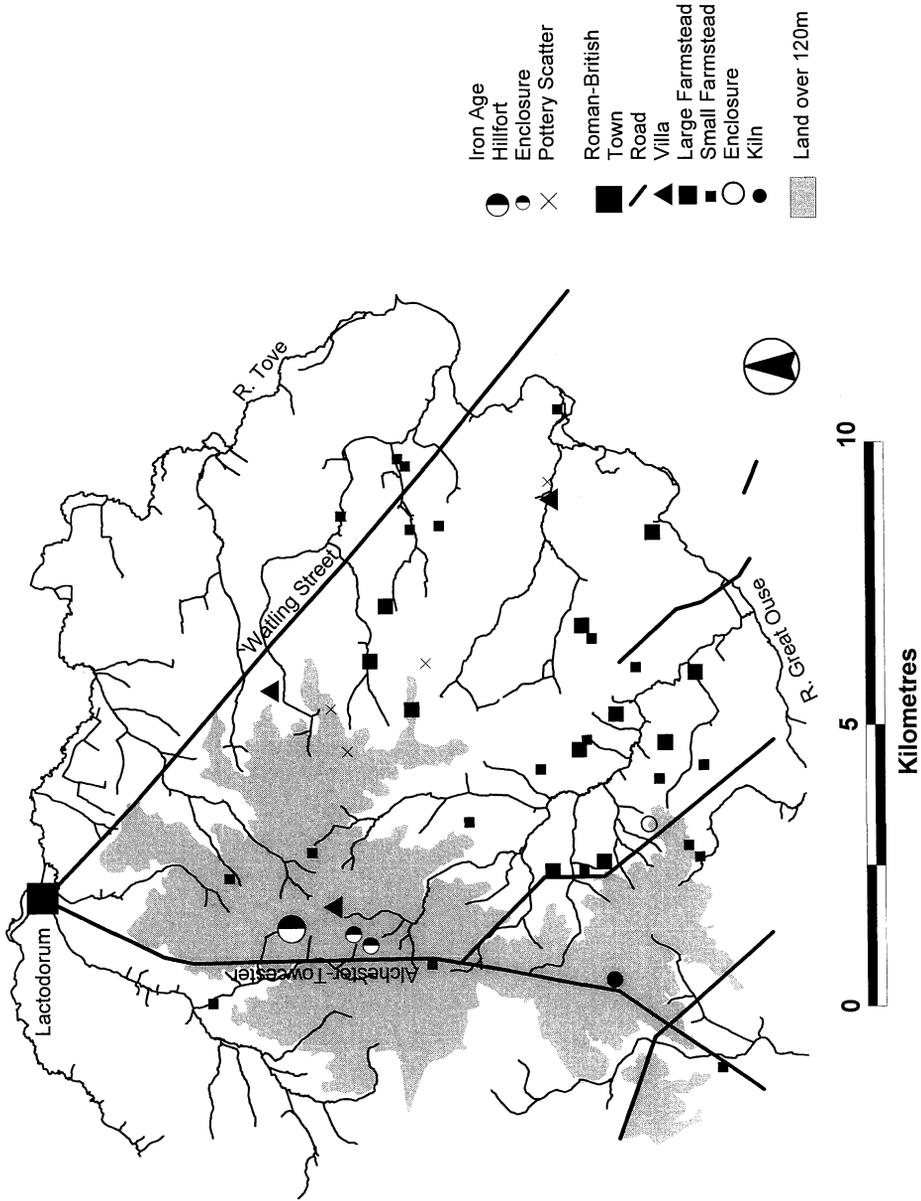


FIG. 2
Iron-age and Roman-period evidence from Whitelewood mapped against relief and drainage.

at The Gullet in Whittlebury and at Wakefield Lodge in Potterspurty.²⁵ Numerous other settlements and large isolated Romanized farmsteads have been located in the parishes of Potterspurty, Wicken, and Silverstone,²⁶ and to these may be added sites in Akeley and Leckhampstead.²⁷ Some of these sites, for example, east of Potterspurty, Deanshanger villa, and Briary Wood in Deanshanger, have produced both Iron-age and early Roman material suggesting some continuity of occupation and settlement pattern.²⁸ However, it is clear that during the Roman Period, settlement intensified and expanded. Native farmsteads, identified as small concentrations of Romano-British pottery, are encountered across the whole area, occurring approximately every 800 m across the landscape, although dating of the pottery reveals that not all of these sites were occupied contemporaneously.²⁹

Nevertheless, the Whittlewood area apparently supported a large rural population in a well-defined social hierarchy, although it is far from clear how the extended estates presumably associated with the high-status sites were arranged. Local topography was clearly of some relevance in their location. The villa sites, for instance, appear to have favoured the lighter soils, specifically selecting areas of limestone outcropping along the tributary streams, such as Cosgrove and Deanshanger, or areas of free-draining glacial sand and gravel pockets, as at The Gullet and Wakefield Lodge. Some secondary sites occupy elevated positions, albeit on the claylands, as at Stockholt Farm in Akeley and in Leckhampstead, while the location of the smallest sites suggest that they were fitted within an ordered landholding framework, unable to select the best aspect, underlying geology, or close proximity to natural watercourses.

Evidence for the environment within which this dense but dispersed settlement pattern was set has been forthcoming from systematic fieldwalking. Of the 57 fields (528 ha) surveyed, only two have failed to produce Romano-British pottery. Most of these fields have produced small but well-spread assemblages indicative of manuring on the clayland watershed and down on to the alluvial floodplains of the major rivers. All the archaeological indications are that the Whittlewood area was intensively cultivated and largely cleared of trees by the end of the Roman occupation, although no archaeological evidence can be put forward as to the nature of the field systems themselves. Further corroboration for this conclusion comes from the nature of the pottery scatters. Had the occupants of these isolated farmsteads been carving a living from small clearings within a largely wooded environment, discrete pottery concentrations would mark the extent of clearance and agricultural use, separated by zones where pottery was absent representing non-arable land use. But where large parts of contiguous countryside have been sampled, for example, within the parishes of Leckhampstead and Wicken, the pottery spreads appear uninterrupted (Fig. 3). Yet the landscape cannot have been

²⁵ RCHM(E), *op. cit.* in note 18, 34, 41, 118 and 168–9.

²⁶ RCHM(E), *op. cit.* in note 18, 118, 132 and 171.

²⁷ R. Jones, 'Medieval settlements and landscapes in the Whittlewood area: a pilot. Fieldwalking report 2000–2002' (unpubl. rep., 2002).

²⁸ RCHM(E), *op. cit.* in note 18, 41 and 118.

²⁹ Jones, *op. cit.* in note 27; P. Lawrence, 'A summary of the archaeological fieldwork conducted in the parishes of Deanshanger, Furtho and Potterspurty by students of Birkbeck College, University of London, between 1994 and 1998' (unpubl. rep., nd.).

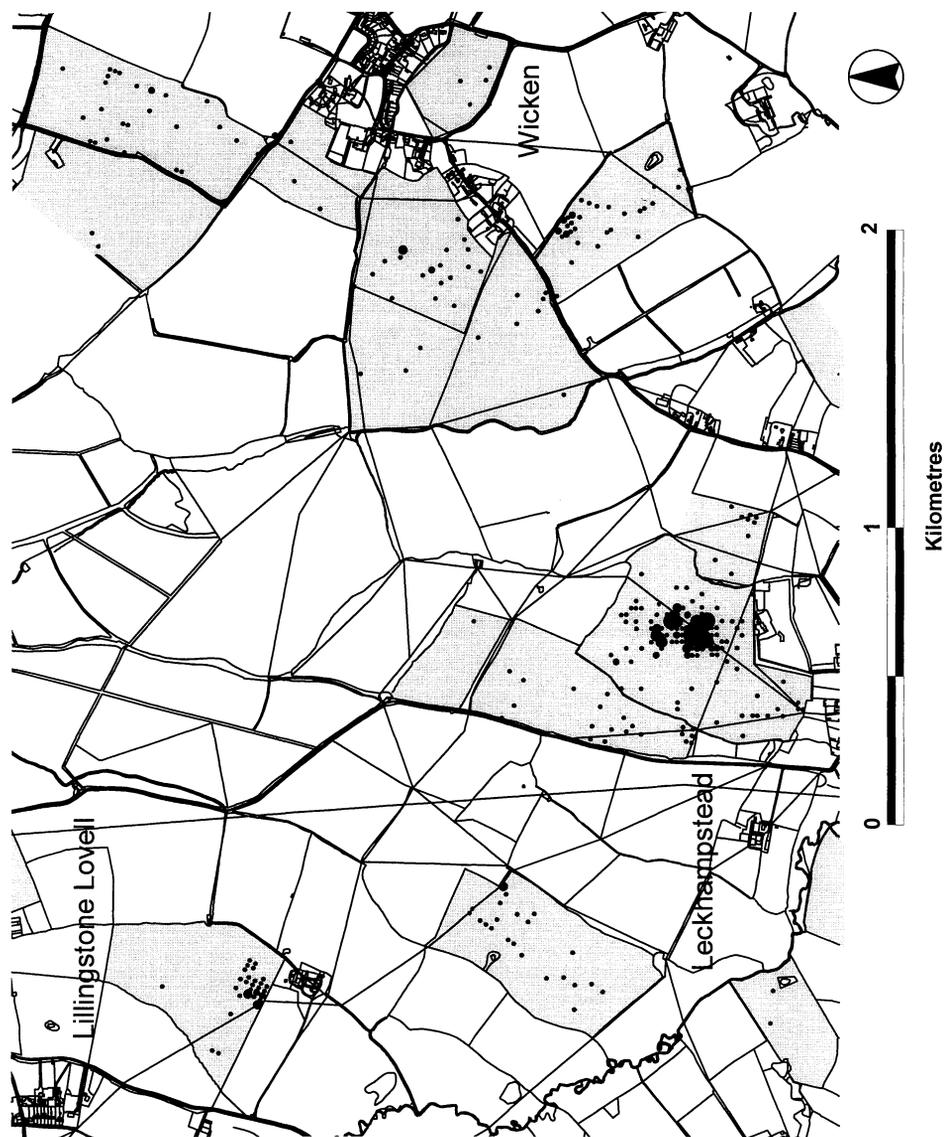


FIG. 3
Distribution of Romano-British pottery in northern Leckhampstead, Wicken and Lillingstone Lovell (shaded areas surveyed).

totally denuded of tree cover. Towcester would have required large quantities of wood and timber for domestic, industrial and building use while there is evidence from Stowe and Syresham of pottery production, an activity which required large quantities of fuel.³⁰ However, it would appear that woodland areas were restricted and probably closely managed. Their location might tentatively be suggested by the few fields which have failed to produce any pottery.

Three characteristic features can therefore be defined for this period: extensive cultivation; restricted tree-cover; and a hierarchical but dispersed settlement pattern. This emerging picture of the Roman landscape of Whittlewood is by no means unique. Indeed, in other later wooded areas such as Wychwood Forest (Oxfordshire), Grovely Forest (Wiltshire), Micheldever Wood (Hampshire), in north-eastern Bedfordshire, and to a lesser extent in Rockingham Forest (Northamptonshire), archaeological evidence also points towards extensive occupation and cultivation at this earlier period.³¹ However, Roman occupation in Whittlewood was not as intensive as in other parts of the Midlands, for instance in central and eastern Northamptonshire.³² This can be explained in part by the political and economic landscape in which the area lay. Just as Whittlewood had been marginal to the tribal arrangements of the Iron Age, so it remained in the Roman provincial system.³³ Moreover, Whittlewood remained remote from the economic influence of any major urban centre, although Watling Street provided a direct link to London. Towcester, the only local centre, remained a small town throughout the period. Its hinterland is poorly understood but must have encompassed a large part of later Whittlewood. Yet its influence cannot have been as great, for instance, as the hinterlands around major centres such as St Albans.³⁴ The landscape and settlement arrangement of Roman-period Whittlewood thus appears to have shared characteristics with large parts of lowland south-eastern England. There is nothing in the Roman evidence to offer an explanation for the hybrid and anomalous patterns which were to appear during the centuries after A.D. 400.

There is clear archaeological evidence to suggest that the end of Roman occupation marked a break in land use and settlement, most obviously in urban Towcester where few Early-medieval finds have been made.³⁵ This suggests that the town lost much of its importance and thus cannot have exerted the same influence over the Whittlewood area as it had done before. The evidence from the rural contexts is more mixed. While the town continued to flourish until the end of the occupation, in the countryside villas were in decline and were being abandoned

³⁰ Wainwright, *op. cit.* in note 10; RCHM(E), *op. cit.* in note 18, 141.

³¹ B. Schumer, *The Evolution of Wychwood to 1400: Pioneers, Frontiers and Forests* (Univ. Leicester Dept. English Local Hist., Occ. Papers, 3rd ser., 6, 1984); O. Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London, 1990), 41; A. Brown and C. Taylor 'The origins of dispersed settlement: some results from fieldwork in Bedfordshire', *Landscape Hist.*, 11 (1989), 61–81; B. Bellamy, 'Anglo-Saxon dispersed sites and woodland at Geddington in Rockingham Forest, Northamptonshire', *Landscape Hist.*, 16 (1994), 31–37 at p. 34.

³² Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 68–9.

³³ Jones and Mattingly, *op. cit.* in note 17, 154.

³⁴ Hunn, *op. cit.* in note 24, 49–50. Some idea of the size of urban hinterlands can be gauged by the location of villas with mosaics, generally within a 25-mile radius of any town; Jones and Mattingly, *op. cit.* in note 17, 221.

³⁵ C. Woodfield, 'The defences of Towcester, Northamptonshire', *Northamptonshire Archaeol.*, 24 (1992), 13–66; J. Sunderland and M. Webb (eds.), *Towcester: The Story of an English Country Town* (Towcester, 1995), 51–9.

during the early 4th century. The villas at Cosgrove and The Gullet seem to have been abandoned around A.D. 300 while parts of former residential elements of Deanshanger villa appear to have been converted to agricultural and light industrial usage by the 3rd century.³⁶ Conversely, many Romanized farmsteads seem to have survived through to the end of the occupation. The building at Mount Mill Farm in Wicken has produced pottery of 3rd- and 4th-century date,³⁷ while the farmstead at Stockholt Farm in Akeley has produced a range of coinage from the mid-3rd century to the early 5th (Arcadius, 383–408).³⁸ The evidence points to a slow and gradual decline in the rural population from around 300 and marked decline at the end of the occupation.

THE EARLY-MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE

Only one of the many known Roman sites has produced material of 5th- and 6th-century date. Indeed, there is an almost total lack of settlement evidence of that period for the whole of the Whittlewood area. That the area was not entirely depopulated and unexploited is only substantiated by three Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery sites, the first at Passenham where 5th-century pottery was associated with many of the more than 50 burials, a second close to Watling Street south of Paulerspury, and a third at Marston St Lawrence (Fig. 4).³⁹ These cemeteries, however, lie at the periphery of later Whittlewood and perhaps point to a shift of population away from the central boulder clay zone. Traces of activity on the clayland during the first four centuries following Roman occupation are restricted to the discovery from fieldwalking and test-pitting of sherds of handmade pottery dated to A.D. 400–850. There would appear to be a clear association of this early material with later settlement sites. Occupied areas of Akeley, Lamport in Stowe, Lillingstone Dayrell, and both Church End and Barretts End in Leckhampstead, have all produced sherds of this date. It is tempting to propose that this correlation is evidence for an underlying Early-medieval settlement pattern which influenced subsequent development.⁴⁰ This settlement stability is further suggested by the absence of archaeological evidence for other contemporary settlements lying outside the later occupied zones, despite extensive fieldwalking in these areas. Nor do later charters, which provide valuable furlong names, contain much evidence for lost settlement sites. In particular, there are very few cases of medieval furlong names with habitative elements such as *tun*, *cot*, *stead* and *thorpe*, which elsewhere have been shown to overlie earlier settlements.⁴¹

³⁶ RCHM(E), op. cit. in note 18, 34, 41 and 169.

³⁷ RCHM(E), op. cit. in note 18, 171.

³⁸ The coins, found by a metal-detectorist, have been retained by the farmer, but seen by one of the present authors.

³⁹ RCHM(E), op. cit. in note 18, 100, 109–10 and 117.

⁴⁰ Pottery of 5th- to 9th-century date is very friable and likely to deteriorate quickly through the attrition of the medieval and modern plough. Sealed below later settlement, and thus not subject to the same disturbance, it is possible that the recovered sherds had a greater chance of survival than those in ploughsoil. The distribution might not therefore accurately reflect a genuine spatial zoning. Evidence for settlement sites taken into the later medieval field systems might have been totally destroyed.

⁴¹ Brown and Foard, op. cit. in note 14, 76. For relevant charters, see, for example, G. R. Elvey (ed.), *Luffield Priory Charters* (2 vols., Northamptonshire Record Soc., 22, 26, 1968–75).

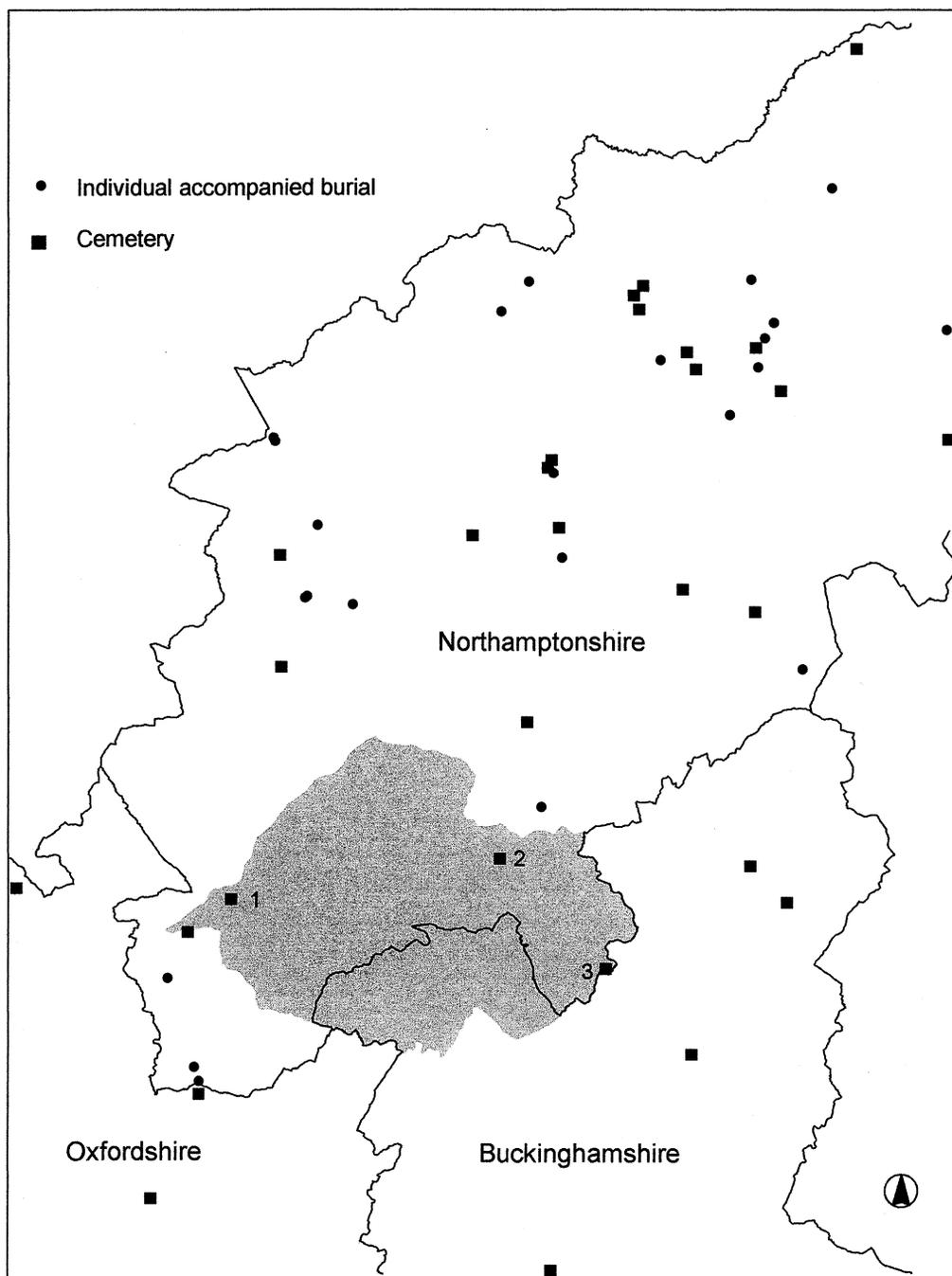


FIG. 4

Early-medieval accompanied burials and cemeteries in Northamptonshire, north Buckinghamshire and north-east Oxfordshire (Whittlewood Forest at its greatest extent shaded). 1, Marston St Lawrence; 2, Paulerspury; 3, Passenham.

Whittlewood appears in the four centuries that followed the Roman Period to have been significantly less populated than other areas of the lowland Midlands where lighter soils predominated. To the north-east, for instance, there is evidence of a dense dispersed settlement pattern of the 5th to 9th centuries. In Maidwell parish (Northamptonshire) five separate sites have been identified, while in Brixworth parish eight settlement sites and two cemeteries have been found.⁴² Further sites are located in the parishes of Spratton, Welford, Chapel Brampton, East Fardon and Harlestone.⁴³ Moreover, in central Northamptonshire twenty cemetery sites have been discovered in an area not much larger than Whittlewood Forest.⁴⁴ This model of population retreat in the post-Roman Period from the claylands in favour of the lighter soils, proposed as a result of the examination of these more favourable areas, can now be corroborated from the alternative perspective by the lack of forthcoming archaeological evidence from extensive work on the claylands of Whittlewood. Thus, some of the very reasons postulated by 'great replanning' theorists as giving rise to the conditions which necessitated nucleation were simply not applicable to Whittlewood. The landscape was not filled with small dispersed settlements as in Brixworth or Maidwell, subsequently abandoned in favour of clustered settlement and the laying-out of extensive open fields. Rather, the sparse settlement pattern could be retained since there was ample space for the creation of new fields around existing dwelling areas. The result was thus hybrid: landscape elements of the replanning appear to have been adopted, yet older patterns of settlement were able to prevail.

The low Early-medieval population thus seems to provide the basis for the origins of the divergent development of Whittlewood's settlement pattern. Population retreat after 400 was also to have an effect on the landscape, providing the opportunity for woodland regeneration. That regeneration took place is clear from the finds of Romano-British pottery in areas that were later wooded, together with the large amounts of woodland recorded in Domesday Book. But the process by which this took place is as yet poorly understood. Did woodland colonize the Roman fields naturally from the small blocks of woodland preserved within the landscape? Or was the regeneration aided by human intervention? The chronology of this regeneration also remains unclear. The partial dismantling of the rural social hierarchy, witnessed by the decline and abandonment of villas after A.D. 300, may have resulted in small-scale regeneration of woodland even before the Roman occupation was over. However, it is probable that this process only reached its height after the Roman Period, following the general decline in population over large parts of Whittlewood.

The increasingly wooded landscape of the Whittlewood area in the Early Middle Ages may have influenced the boundaries of the various territories forming there in the 200 years prior to the Norman Conquest. Before the 10th century the countryside is believed to have been dominated by large holdings of land, known

⁴² RCHM(E), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Northampton. III: Archaeological Sites in North-West Northamptonshire* (London, 1981), 30 and 136.

⁴³ RCHM(E), *op. cit.* in note 42, xxxviii.

⁴⁴ RCHM(E), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Northampton. II: Archaeological Sites in Central Northamptonshire* (London, 1979), *passim*.

to historians as 'multiple estates' or 'great estates'. These were held by the king and aristocracy, and by bishops and monasteries, who expected from them regular supplies of food and rent. After about 850 the great estates began to be broken up and the pieces granted to followers and family.⁴⁵ These smaller holdings of land often became the parishes of the post-Conquest period, as lords sought to augment their status by building churches close to their place of residence. The division of the great estates was often designed to ensure an equitable distribution among the new territories of the available resources of arable, pasture and woodland. In some cases this was achieved by the creation of detached portions, which might lie at some distance from the rest of the holding.⁴⁶

The Whittlewood area probably formed part of the kingdom of Mercia in the 9th century, until the defeat of the Mercian king by the Vikings in 874.⁴⁷ At the end of the 9th century, the Danish invasions reached Watling Street, as indicated by the treaty signed by King Alfred and Guthrum in 886x890. According to interpretation based on that treaty, the border of the Danelaw ran along the course of the old Roman road in southern Northamptonshire. However, place-name evidence suggests little, if any, Scandinavian influence in the Whittlewood area.⁴⁸ Instead, the area was of strategic significance for the kings of Wessex. In 921, Edward the Elder, son of Alfred the Great, stationed his West Saxon army at Passenham, on the Great Ouse, while the stronghold at Towcester was being fortified.⁴⁹ According to one of his law-codes, Edward's son, Athelstan, held a council at Whittlebury in about 930.⁵⁰ The extent of the king's landholdings in Whittlewood at this time is uncertain. However, it is likely that any great estates still in existence in the 10th century soon became fragmented. The general pattern of the subsequent reorganization may be reconstructed from post-Conquest evidence and from parish boundaries (Fig. 5).

The parishes of Silverstone and Whittlebury, for example, were both chapelries of the royal manor of Greens Norton in the Middle Ages and formed a detached part of Greens Norton hundred. They were probably a single estate before the Conquest and may not have been divided until the 12th century. Whittlebury is not recorded in Domesday Book and part of it, at least, was held of the fee of Silverstone.⁵¹ Greens Norton was almost certainly the centre of an Anglo-Saxon great estate and minster parish, which retained an association with its various 'members' throughout the medieval period.⁵² Passenham too may once have been the centre of a larger territory than that encompassed by the medieval

⁴⁵ C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (New Haven and London, 2002), 26-31.

⁴⁶ Hall, *op. cit.* in note 14, 104.

⁴⁷ E. James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2001), 130 and 223-4.

⁴⁸ Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 43 and 45; G. Fellows-Jensen, *Scandinavian Settlement Names in the East Midlands* (Copenhagen, 1978), 231-67.

⁴⁹ M. J. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1996), 102.

⁵⁰ D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents, I, c.500-1042* (2nd ed., London, 1979), 427.

⁵¹ W. Ryland, D. Adkins and R. M. Serjeantson (eds.), *The Victoria County History of Northamptonshire I* (London, 1902), 373; Jones and Page, *op. cit.* in note 8, 23.

⁵² E.g. for the purpose of Late-medieval tax assessment: Public Record Office (henceforth PRO), E179/155/31, mm. 9-10; G. Foard, 'The administrative organization of Northamptonshire in the Saxon period', *Anglo-Saxon Stud. Archaeol. Hist.*, 4 (1985), 185-222 at p. 216.

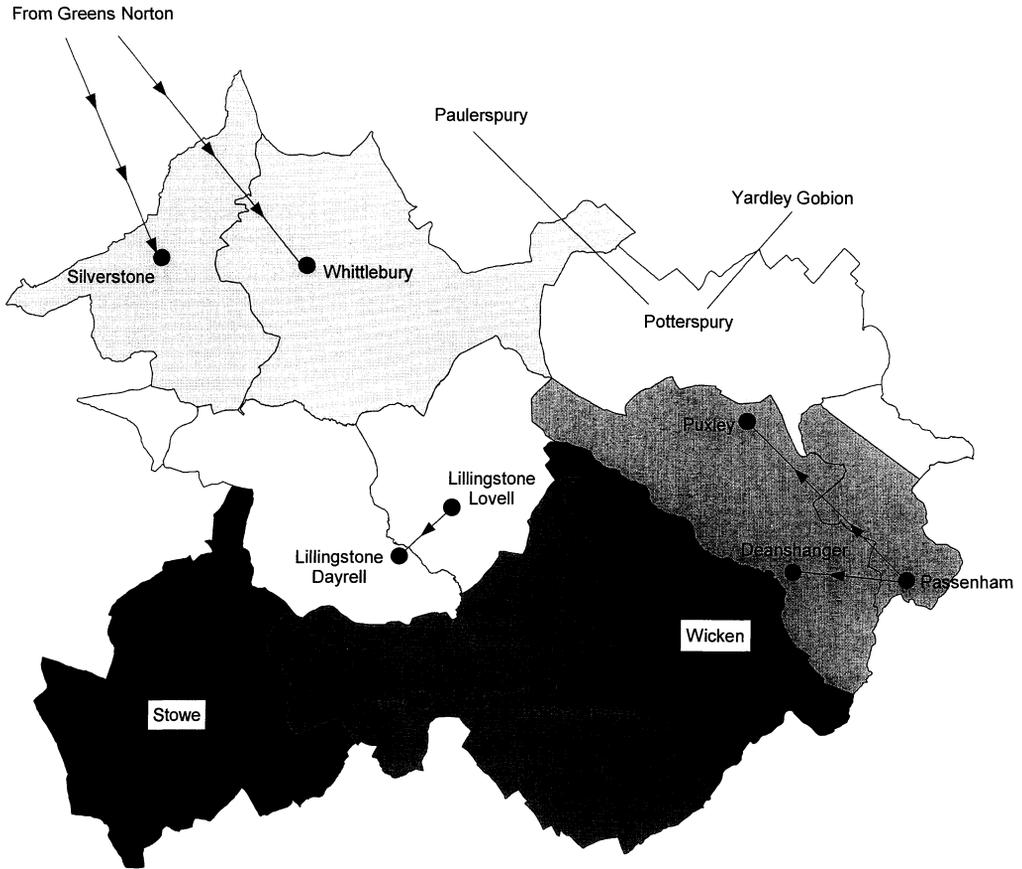


FIG. 5

Early estate arrangement and settlement direction.

parish. In 1086 the jurisdiction ('soke') of part of neighbouring Cosgrove was vested in the manor, which at this time belonged in the king's possession.⁵³

Other examples of estate fragmentation may include the Lillingstones, which presumably formed a single estate of ten hides before the Conquest, subsequently divided along a stream. Lillingstone Lovell was originally called Great (*Magna*) Lillingstone, its western neighbour Little (*Parva*) Lillingstone.⁵⁴ There is a likelihood that Leckhampstead and Akeley were also at one time a single estate. In the 12th century the chapel at Akeley was said to be dependent on the mother church at Leckhampstead, to which it owed the sum of 2s. a year.⁵⁵ Throughout the Middle Ages, Cosgrove shared a field system with Furtho, a small parish of less than 700 acres, while the inhabitants of Potterspury enjoyed rights of common in both

⁵³ Adkins and Serjeantson, *op. cit.* in note 51, 307 and 323; Foard, *op. cit.* in note 52, 218.

⁵⁴ W. Page (ed.), *The Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire IV* (London, 1927), 188.

⁵⁵ H. E. Salter (ed.), *Newington Longeville Charters* (Oxfordshire Record Soc., 3, 1921), no. 16.

Furtho and Cosgrove.⁵⁶ The parishes of Potterspury and Yardley Gobion were originally one, and it might be argued that Potterspury (formerly East Perry) and Paulerspury (formerly West Perry) formed a single estate in the Early Middle Ages.⁵⁷

Altogether, the evidence suggests that the Whittlewood area was subject to the break up of an unknown number of large blocks of land, perhaps in the 10th century following the consolidation of West Saxon rule, to create the fragmented pattern of manorial lordship recorded in Domesday Book. At this time the project area comprised thirteen manors in Buckinghamshire and fifteen manors in Northamptonshire.⁵⁸ Many of the parish boundaries laid down during this period of reorganization seem to have been designed to ensure that each community had access to adequate supplies of woodland (Fig. 6). Thus the parishes of Leckhampstead, Passenham and Wicken all converge in the heart of the later forest. The boundaries of Foscoate parish too reach northwards from the River Great Ouse to the outskirts of Akeley to secure access to the woodland growing there. A similar morphology can also be seen to the west of the project area, to secure a share of the woodland around Syresham.

Furthermore, the association of Silverstone and Whittlebury with Greens Norton was probably the result of the king's need for access to hunting areas and resources of timber within the woods. The inhabitants of Cosgrove, which lay close to the confluence of Great Ouse and Tove, held detached portions of land in what is now Potterspury parish, in order to gain access to the woods of Whittlewood Forest. The wooded north-eastern part of Lillingstone Lovell belonged to Lillingstone Dayrell in the Middle Ages, while Lovell itself formed a detached part of Oxfordshire, probably as the result of a dependency upon the important royal manor of Kirtlington.⁵⁹

The regeneration of woodland in the Early Middle Ages may thus have influenced the creation of a complex pattern of territories in the Whittlewood area, as the woodland which had formerly belonged to individual great estates was redistributed among a number of separate smaller holdings. Moreover, not only did this reorganization create several detached portions of parishes within the later forest, but also detached portions of hundreds (Greens Norton, Ploughley) and counties (Oxfordshire). Even the county boundary between Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire appears to leave its natural course along the Great Ouse and turn abruptly northwards into the woodland. Changes to the natural landscape in the post-Roman Period, therefore, seem to have had a considerable effect upon the political and administrative landscape of Whittlewood in the Middle Ages.

⁵⁶ P. Riden (ed.), *The Victoria County History of Northamptonshire: V, Cleley Hundred* (London, 2002), 77 and 134–5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁵⁸ W. Page (ed.), *The Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire I* (London, 1905), 231–77; Adkins and Serjeantson, *op. cit.* in note 51, 304–56.

⁵⁹ Riden, *op. cit.* in note 56, 77 and 290; Foard, *op. cit.* in note 52, 214; M. D. Lobel (ed.), *The Victoria County History of Oxfordshire: VI, Ploughley Hundred* (London, 1959), 3; *The Old Series Ordnance Survey Maps of England and Wales, IV, Central England* (Lympe Castle, 1986), 44.

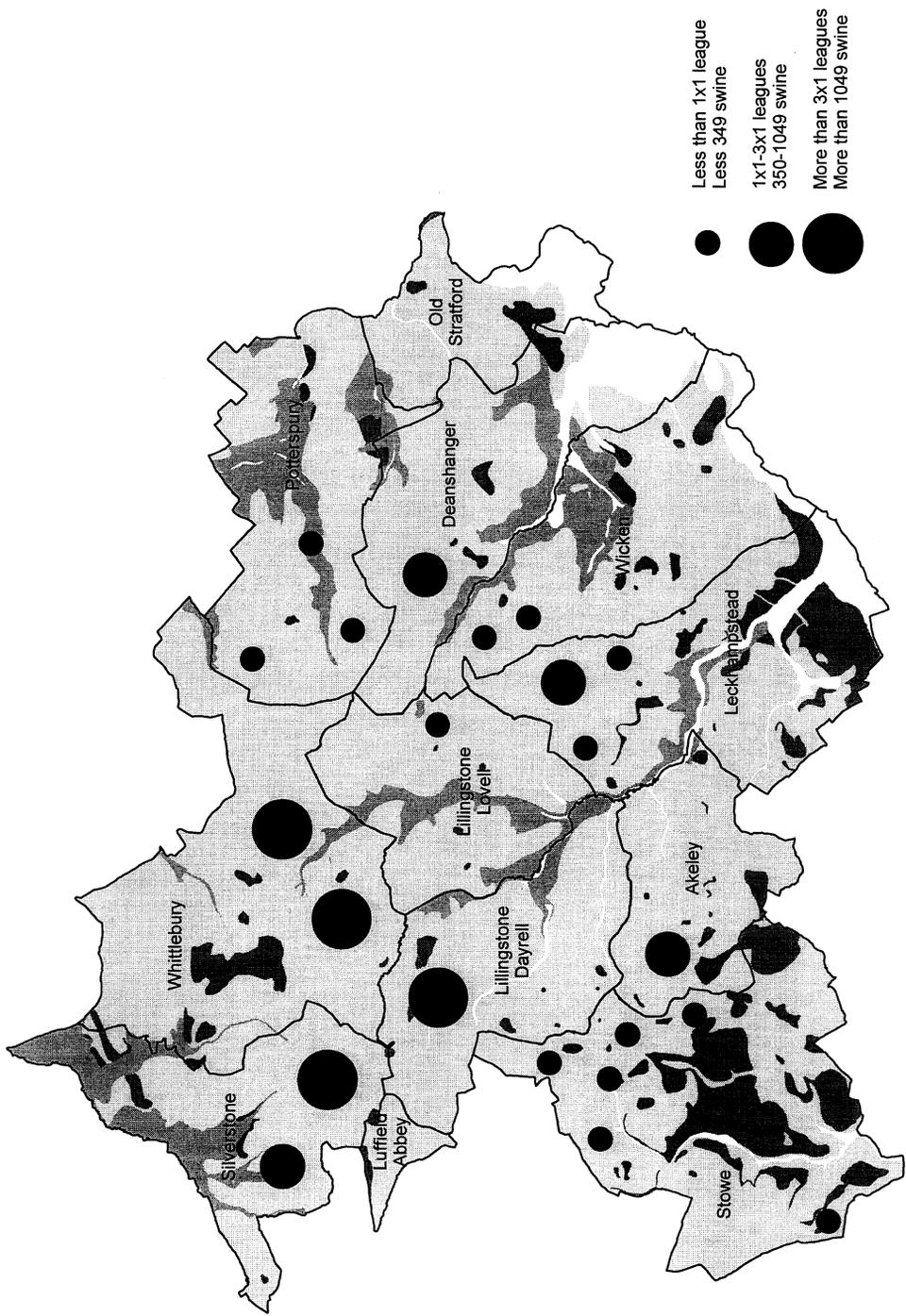


FIG. 6
Domesday woodland: general distribution plotted against geology.

THE COLONIZATION OF THE WOODLAND

The regeneration of woodland in the Whittlewood area during the Early Middle Ages is by no means a unique or unusual development. In other parts of England, such as Oxfordshire and Worcestershire, areas of medieval woodland can be shown to have been occupied with fields of grain during the centuries of Roman rule.⁶⁰ The clearance of woodland in order to extend arable cultivation was a well-known feature of the 11th to 13th centuries. It was in this period that the anomalous features of the Whittlewood area appear most clearly, in terms of the pattern of medieval settlement and landscape. The area appears to be hybrid because it does not conform to the models of settlement and landscape evolution outlined by historians for other areas of England. Instead it displays characteristics common to a number of different types of countryside or *pays*. This emphasizes the difficulties of classifying a large area such as England in terms of a few broad categories. Whittlewood is not a large enough area to be classified as a *pays* in its own right, even if future research finds that it shares common characteristics with other parts of the country. It is rather an area on the boundary between two common types of countryside in England — those of woodland and champion — exhibiting the characteristics of both.

The contrasts between these two supposedly very different types of *pays* — woodland and champion — have often been drawn. In the champion countryside of the 13th and 14th centuries, nucleated villages were the norm, surrounded by open fields farmed by peasants holding standard-sized tenements who made their living primarily from grain-growing. In the woodlands, by contrast, a more dispersed pattern of settlement prevailed. The arable fields were more irregular and often enclosed, lying scattered among areas of woodland and pasture. The size of landholdings was more varied, the inhabitants enjoyed greater freedom from lordship, and they practised a wider variety of occupations than would be found in the champion areas.⁶¹ Nevertheless, it has been recognized that these contrasts can be exaggerated and that particular areas of countryside might develop characteristics associated with both champion and woodland *pays*. At Hanbury in Worcestershire, for example, a dispersed pattern of settlement in a woodland environment developed alongside open fields farmed by customary half-virgate holders owing relatively heavy labour services.⁶²

Whittlewood is similar to Hanbury only in that it developed characteristics associated with both champion and woodland. The mix of those characteristics, however, differed. Similarly, the evolution of the Whittlewood area may be compared with the colonization of the woodlands in the wolds, such as those in Kent or the Bromswold area of eastern Northamptonshire. The utilization of the resources of woodland or wold is usually considered to have taken place from mainly arable settlements which had acquired rights over an area of wood or wood-pasture. The links between vale and woodland or vale and wold are not hard

⁶⁰ C. Dyer, *Hanbury: Settlement and Society in a Woodland Landscape* (Univ. Leicester Dept. English Local Hist., Occ. Pap., 4th ser., 4, 1991), 2 and 27.

⁶¹ Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 60, 1–2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 61.

to find in medieval England.⁶³ In the Whittlewood area, it appears that the woods of Deanshanger and Puxley were exploited from Passenham, those of Silverstone and Whittlebury from Greens Norton, those of Akeley from Leckhampstead, and those of Lillingstone Dayrell (*Parva*) from Lillingstone Lovell (*Magna*). In each case the secondary settlement was initially dependent on the mother settlement, before it gained a sufficient population or seigneurial interest to be able to function independently in its own right. The signs of dependency nevertheless persisted, in ecclesiastical organization in the case of Passenham, Leckhampstead and Greens Norton, and in the evidence of place-names in the case of the Lillingstones.

In the case of the Kentish wolds, the woodland was cleared by 1086 and was worked by pastoral farmers living in dispersed settlements.⁶⁴ In the Bromswold area of Northamptonshire, parts of the woodland were similarly cleared by 1086 but, unlike Kent, were incorporated into the open arable fields of nucleated villages, such as Clopton.⁶⁵ In other parts of Bromswold, the woodland was not cleared until the 13th century, when that too was added to the open fields of villages such as Barnwell.⁶⁶ This is typical of 'wold' country, which today is usually open, windswept upland.⁶⁷ The contrasts between the Kentish wold and Bromswold reflect the different types of farming and settlement pattern prevailing in areas which otherwise share a similar evolution. Likewise, in the case of the settlements in the Whittlewood area, though less nucleated than in other areas of Northamptonshire, they were not as dispersed as those in Kent. Similarly, although some land cleared from the woodland was enclosed and farmed in severalty, much of the newly colonized arable was incorporated into one of the three open fields which were a feature of most of the parishes of the study area.⁶⁸

The chronology of the creation of the open fields of the project area is as yet unclear. Some were probably in existence before the Norman Conquest. Even a potentially secondary settlement such as Akeley may have already possessed in 1086 the three open fields that can be shown to have been present in the later Middle Ages.⁶⁹ The three hides of the manor's assessment in Domesday Book appear to correspond with the three fields of roughly 120 acres each (Fig. 7), which were ploughed by the half plough-team of the lord and his two slaves, together with the 2½ ploughs of two villeins and four bordars. By contrast, the open fields of Deanshanger and Puxley, settlements dependent upon Passenham, were probably created during the centuries following the Norman Conquest as a result of assarting. Deanshanger is not named in Domesday Book, and in 1566 its four fields included a number of furlong names — Great and Little Stocking, and Overbreach, for example — which are indicative of assarting.⁷⁰ Puxley consisted of two small tenancies in 1086 with a single plough between them. By the 14th century the

⁶³ Fox, *op. cit.* in note 12, 85–9.

⁶⁴ A. Everitt, 'River and wold: reflections on the historical origin of regions and *pays*', *J. Hist. Geography*, 3 (1977), 1–19, repr. in A. Everitt, *Landscape and Community in England* (London, 1985), 41–59, at p. 55.

⁶⁵ Hall, *op. cit.* in note 14, 105 and 235–7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 105 and 190–1.

⁶⁷ Everitt, *op. cit.* in note 64, 51; Fox, *op. cit.* in note 12, 78–85.

⁶⁸ Jones and Page, *op. cit.* in note 8, 18–19 and 24; Riden, *op. cit.* in note 56, 210–11 and 292–3.

⁶⁹ New College Oxford, 4084, m. 12.

⁷⁰ PRO, DL43/8/6A, fols. 28v and 30v.

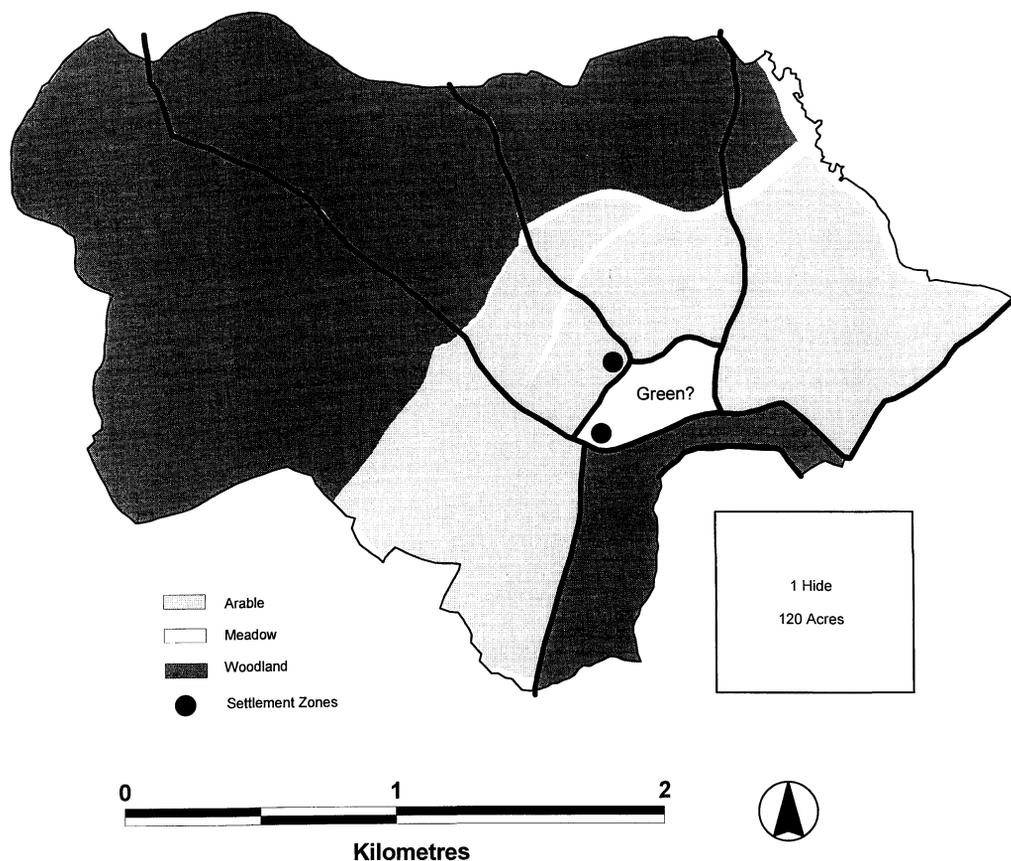


FIG. 7
Akeley at the time of Domesday Book.

settlement had grown considerably. In 1341 one estate at Puxley consisted of at least twenty-nine houses, and a charter of 1384 reveals that open-field agriculture was practised.⁷¹

While it is possible that in both Whittlewood and Bromswold, clearance of woodland began at an early date, say from the 7th or 8th century onwards, it did not continue in Whittlewood until all the wood was gone. Thus, it was more like the western part of the Kentish wold, which remained wooded, while Bromswold was like the eastern part, which was cleared. Was this because the soil was poor in Whittlewood, as in the western part of the Kentish wold?⁷² This is unlikely, because it was farmed in the Roman Period, as we have already established. Other factors must have been at work.

There can be no doubt that population was lower in the Whittlewood area than in the river valleys and wolds of Kent. Domesday Book shows that parts of

⁷¹ *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, VIII, no. 288; PRO, E210/2449.

⁷² Everitt, *op. cit.* in note 64, 52–3.

Kent and East Anglia were among the most heavily populated parts of the country in 1086.⁷³ Similarly, the Bromswold area was more densely populated than Whittlewood at the same time.⁷⁴ Thus, there was not the same degree of pressure of people on resources driving the extension of farming into the woodland areas of Whittlewood. It seems unlikely that the introduction of open-field farming, which has been dated to the 9th century in parts of Northamptonshire, restricted the colonization of woodland. Certainly, in Clopton and Barnwell the remaining areas of woodland were cleared and turned over to arable. However, a larger amount of woodland in the Whittlewood area probably supported a more balanced mix of arable and livestock farming. Domesday Book suggests that the peasantry of these manors held large numbers of pigs which were fed on the acorns and beech mast of the woodlands. Other livestock too would have found plentiful pasture in the woods of the area.

As population grew, however, in the centuries leading up to c. 1300, the pressure to clear woodland in order to extend the arable became intense. In Whittlewood large areas were assarted, some of which were enclosed, while other parts were added to the open fields. This clearance continued almost to the eve of the Black Death in 1348–9, suggesting that the demand for land did not slacken as in some parts of the country after about 1300 and that population remained at a high level.⁷⁵ It is impossible to say whether the inhabitants of Whittlewood would have cleared all the woodland before the mid-14th century, had they been given a free choice. However, their freedom of action was to some extent curtailed after the Norman Conquest by the imposition of forest law. This regulated the colonization of the woodland by instituting regular inspections of assarting, for which fines were levied. Whittlewood was a popular hunting ground of the English kings in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries, as the development of the forest lodge at Silverstone and later the castle at Moor End indicates.⁷⁶ Assarting may have been prohibited in those parts of the forest which were considered vital for the king's chase, and was licensed only in areas where the activities of the assarters would not interfere with the grazing of the deer.

The clearance of woodland and waste for the purpose of extending the arable was common to many parts of England in the 12th and 13th centuries. However, the pattern of landscape and settlement which resulted from this colonizing movement varied from one area of the country to another. In Whittlewood, the records of the forest regard from the early 13th century onwards show that assarting was mostly conducted on a relatively small scale, by lords and peasants who fined for plots of land ranging in size from a fraction of an acre to ten acres or more, although occasionally much larger areas were cleared. At Silverstone tenants might plough the cleared land, such as the acre assarted by Ralph de Trubbeville which was sown with oats in the mid-13th century; or they might build cottages on

⁷³ Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 135.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁵ PRO, E32/115.

⁷⁶ R. Allen Brown, H. M. Colvin and A. J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works* (2 vols., London, 1963), II, 742–5 and 1002–3.

the land, as John Mariot did on two-and-a-quarter acres in the early 14th century.⁷⁷ Many of the medieval assarts at Silverstone were said to have been enclosed with a ditch and hedge. Some are still recognizable on the forest map of c. 1608, situated to the south of the village, with names such as Grindons Sart, Cunies Sart and Dancombs Sart.⁷⁸ The smallholding tenants of Silverstone, with little or no arable land, made their living by exploiting the resources of the woodland. Their way of life, dependent on pasture, gathering and crafts, using woodland fuel and raw materials, was characteristic of woodland societies in general.⁷⁹

However, the inhabitants of Silverstone were not entirely typical of freeholding woodland communities. As at Hanbury, there was a significant number of customary tenants who in the late 13th century owed labour services to the king, lord of one of the two manors in Silverstone parish. Nineteen virgate holders and 38 half-virgate holders were listed in a survey of the king's manor in 1288 who were obliged to perform labour services: weeding, haymaking, carting, ploughing and reaping for specified lengths of time on the lord's demesne.⁸⁰ Nor were those tenants who only held cotlands entirely exempt from labour services, as they were obliged to attend the great boon-work at harvest time. It is clear though that not all of the assarts which existed in the mid-13th century were recorded in this survey. The lands of the customary tenants lay in strips in large open fields to the north of Silverstone village. There may have been just two fields in the early 13th century, when a grant to Luffield Priory was made of seven acres of land and meadow, of which five acres lay in one field and two acres in another.⁸¹ By the 16th century, a more complicated arrangement of fields had arisen, perhaps as a result of some of the assarted land having been incorporated into the open fields.⁸²

A similar development seems to have occurred at Deanshanger in Passenham parish. The records of assarts of the early 14th century show that small plots of land were cleared by individual tenants, such as the purpresture measuring one perch long by twelve feet wide which Richard Morris made out of the king's ground below the hay of Shrob, part of Whittlewood Forest. The regarders reported that Richard had drawn in and appropriated this purpresture to his own land and sown it with both winter and spring grain. Although there is no explicit indication that Richard enclosed this land, the implication is that he did so. The offence of purpresture meant the construction of unauthorized buildings or enclosures in the forest.⁸³ Nevertheless, this land eventually found its way into the open fields of Deanshanger, suggesting that the enclosure was later removed and incorporated. The field book of 1566 shows that Deanshanger's fields reached to the edge of Shrob Walk, by the pale, and this is shown too on the map of c. 1608.⁸⁴ There is also very little evidence that tenants were holding consolidated groups of

⁷⁷ PRO, E32/66, m. 4; E32/114, m. 4d.

⁷⁸ Northamptonshire Record Office (henceforth NRO), Map 4210. See also Map IV in P. A. J. Pettit, *The Royal Forests of Northamptonshire: A Study in their Economy 1558-1714* (Northamptonshire Record Soc., 23, 1968).

⁷⁹ Dyer, op. cit. in note 60, 48-9.

⁸⁰ Westminster Abbey Muniments, 27783.

⁸¹ Elvey, op. cit. in note 41, I, no. 96.

⁸² Hall, op. cit. in note 14, 342.

⁸³ R. Grant, *The Royal Forests of England* (Stroud, 1991), 44.

⁸⁴ PRO, DL43/8/6A, fo. 19; NRO, Map 4210.

strips in Deanshanger in the mid-16th century. If tenants such as Richard Morris had carved out discrete plots of land for themselves in the 14th century, these were subsequently dispersed.

There can be no doubt that the open fields of Deanshanger were laid out by the late 13th century. Grants of land to Snelshall Priory show that land was held in strips in fields at that time.⁸⁵ Furthermore, as at Silverstone, there were customary tenants at Deanshanger holding virgates. In 1278 an inquest recorded that the forester in fee of Wakefield was entitled to take 'in his time from the township of Deanshanger for every virgate of land one quarter of wheat in return for their having paling for their corn and for collecting dead wood for their fuel in the demesne wood of the lord king'.⁸⁶ The presence of virgate holders at Deanshanger is perhaps more surprising than finding them at Silverstone. No explicit references to a manor at Deanshanger can be found until the 13th century. These customary tenements, therefore, must have been created after the Conquest, perhaps following a pattern adopted at Passenham. At Puxley too there is evidence of open fields and virgate holders, despite the large number of assarts made and cottages built on the manor in the 13th and 14th centuries.⁸⁷

Whittlewood thus shares characteristics common to both woodland and champion *pays*. The loosely nucleated settlements of the study area, together with the open fields and customary tenements, may have been created as a result of both lords and peasants being influenced by the champion countryside surrounding them. Both to the north and south of Whittlewood strongly nucleated villages existed surrounded by two or three open fields which occupied most of the area of the parish, farmed by customary tenants holding virgates and half-virgates. Nevertheless, in Whittlewood this type of countryside formed alongside patterns of settlement and landscape more commonly associated with woodland societies. There was a significant amount of woodland clearance in the later Middle Ages, building of cottages and creation of enclosed fields and closes, the inhabitants of which owed fewer obligations to their lord than the customary tenants and who made their living from occupations other than grain-growing. The ability to expand into the woodland meant that the settlement pattern of the area became complex, as additional settlements grew up with associated territories separate from the open fields of the villages. Thus, places such as Dagnall and Elm Green in Wicken developed, as did Lords Fields Farm in Whittlebury.

It is perhaps not to be expected that a particular area of countryside, which developed according to decisions taken by many hundreds of lords and peasants over several centuries, would evolve according to the precise trajectories drawn up by historians in the 20th century. Thus, medieval Whittlewood was neither champion, woodland nor wold, but shared characteristics with all three.

⁸⁵ J. G. Jenkins (ed.), *The Cartulary of Snelshall Priory* (Buckinghamshire Record Soc., 9, 1945), nos. 156–7.

⁸⁶ G. J. Turner (ed.), *Select Pleas of the Forest* (Selden Soc., 13, 1899), 123.

⁸⁷ PRO, JUST1/616, m. 20d; E210/2449; Page and Jones, op. cit. in note 8, 14–15.

SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT

One of the critical criteria in the choice of study area was the coincidence of settlement plans of varied morphology.⁸⁸ More importantly, although located within the Central Province, the zone dominated by nucleated villages, Whittlewood contains many settlements of dispersed form.⁸⁹ The dispersed nature of many of these settlements is still visible today. Leckhampstead, for instance, is made up of a number of separate 'ends', as is Silverstone, although in the latter modern infilling has begun to obscure the original plan. First-edition Ordnance Survey maps help to identify earlier settlement morphologies, but archaeological investigation has shown that even these may mask earlier, more complex arrangements. Further understanding of early village plans can, however, be gleaned from 17th- and 18th-century maps. These depict lost elements of the general settlement pattern. The deserted hamlets of Lady Nether End in Whittlebury and Elm Green in Wicken can be identified as areas of small, irregular enclosure. Yet the piecemeal coverage of these earlier maps, and the lack of earthwork survey prior to Ordnance Surveys of the 1930s, means that not all the settlements have been mapped.

More than 30 settlements of medieval origin are known within the twelve parishes of the study area and others probably remain to be discovered. In terms of scale, these settlements range through the whole spectrum of medieval settlement, from fully-fledged villages, to hamlets, individual farmsteads, moated sites, ecclesiastical houses and granges, manors and forest lodges. Typologically, the villages in particular exhibit a wide variety of forms. The area contains apparently nucleated settlements such as Passenham, Furtho and Lillingstone Dayrell gathered around the parish church and manor, but also dispersed settlements such as Akeley and Deanshanger which appear to have formed around small greens. There are settlements such as Whittlebury and Lillingstone Lovell which seem to have grown organically around a single focus to which additional planned elements were later added, polyfocal settlements such as Leckhampstead, Potterspury and Silverstone, and there is a single example of a double settlement, Wicken (formerly Wick Hamon and Wick Dyve), forming a single settled area, divided by a small brook and served by two parish churches. This typological diversity is mirrored by their later fortunes. Most of the principal parochial villages have survived, but in the cases of Lillingstone Dayrell and Furtho the villages are totally deserted, while the village of Stowe was displaced to Dadford to make way for the designed gardens and parkland of the 18th-century house. Many of those that have survived exhibit clear signs of shrinkage. Earthworks at Lillingstone Lovell, Whittlebury and Passenham mark the former extent of these villages. The fate of the dependent vills was even more precarious: Puxley in Deanshanger (formerly Passenham), Lamport and Boycott in Stowe, and Elm Green and Dagnall in Wicken have all been totally deserted.

Four of the principal settlements — Akeley, Lillingstone Dayrell, Leckhampstead and Whittlebury — have been subject to archaeological investigation in

⁸⁸ Lewis and Mitchell-Fox, *op. cit.* in note 9, 27–35.

⁸⁹ Roberts and Wrathmell, *op. cit.* in note 3, 2.

2001–2. Common trends have been observed at all four sites which allows a chronological development of these sites to be tentatively proposed. The results from fieldwalking at Lillingstone Dayrell have been particularly important. Since a large part of this deserted village site is now under the plough, it has been possible to reconstruct not only the chronology of village development but also its changing morphology. Spreads of later medieval pottery, particularly local Potterspury wares (1250–1600), show the village at its greatest extent. The village appears to have been based along a single street running east-west just south of the parish church. In addition, houses apparently fronted on to the main Buckingham-Towcester road 400 m west of the church (Fig. 8). Pottery indicates significant growth from c. 1100 and accords well with the threefold population increase recorded from Domesday Book to the Hundred Rolls of 1279.⁹⁰ Critically, pottery was recovered which indicated a probable foundation date c. 1000. 200 m west of the church a well-defined concentration of later Saxon wares was found, including imported wares such as St Neots Wares, type 1 (850–1100), type 2 (1000–1200), and Cotswold-type Oolitic ware (975–1100). A single sherd of Ipswich ware (c. 725–850), found in the same location might suggest some activity on the site prior to village creation. Again the archaeological evidence is in harmony with the fact that Lillingstone Dayrell was in existence by Domesday Book. Interestingly, the later village appears to have developed out from this core, but not to have overlain the original nucleus, the area being free of later medieval material. While a few cottages survived into the 17th century, to be depicted on an estate map drawn up in 1611,⁹¹ fieldwalking reveals that the settlement was in decline by c. 1400 if not before. It is tempting, therefore, to associate the failure of the village with the crises of the 14th century.

Several points of interest emerge from the evidence from Lillingstone Dayrell. First, the suggested late foundation date around the year 1000. This fits the model for the splitting of the earlier ten-hide estate around this time and reinforces the idea that Lillingstone Lovell was the primary site from which colonization took place. Secondly, it would appear that at some point, perhaps around 1250, the village was replanned and laid out on a different street plan. Nevertheless, both in the Late Saxon and post-Conquest periods, Lillingstone Dayrell appears to have been a nucleated settlement. Thirdly, it can be seen that this village was subject to the same pattern of growth and decline which was to affect many Midland villages.

Fieldwalking around some of the southern parts of Leckhampstead, in Middle End, Barretts End and Limes End, shows that settlement spread over a larger area than is now inhabited (Fig. 9). At Limes End, east of Weatherhead Farm, a linear development can be defined by pottery spreads. Here occupation appears to have fronted a holloway leading from the county boundary immediately to the east. Earthworks to the south suggest additional occupation there. The sum of the Leckhampstead evidence reveals distinct settlement elements, which while remaining separate, were much larger than they appear today. Again the archaeological evidence is consistent with the historical. Leckhampstead was one

⁹⁰ The recorded population rose from 11 in 1086 to 33 in 1279.

⁹¹ Buckinghamshire Record Office, D22/22/5.

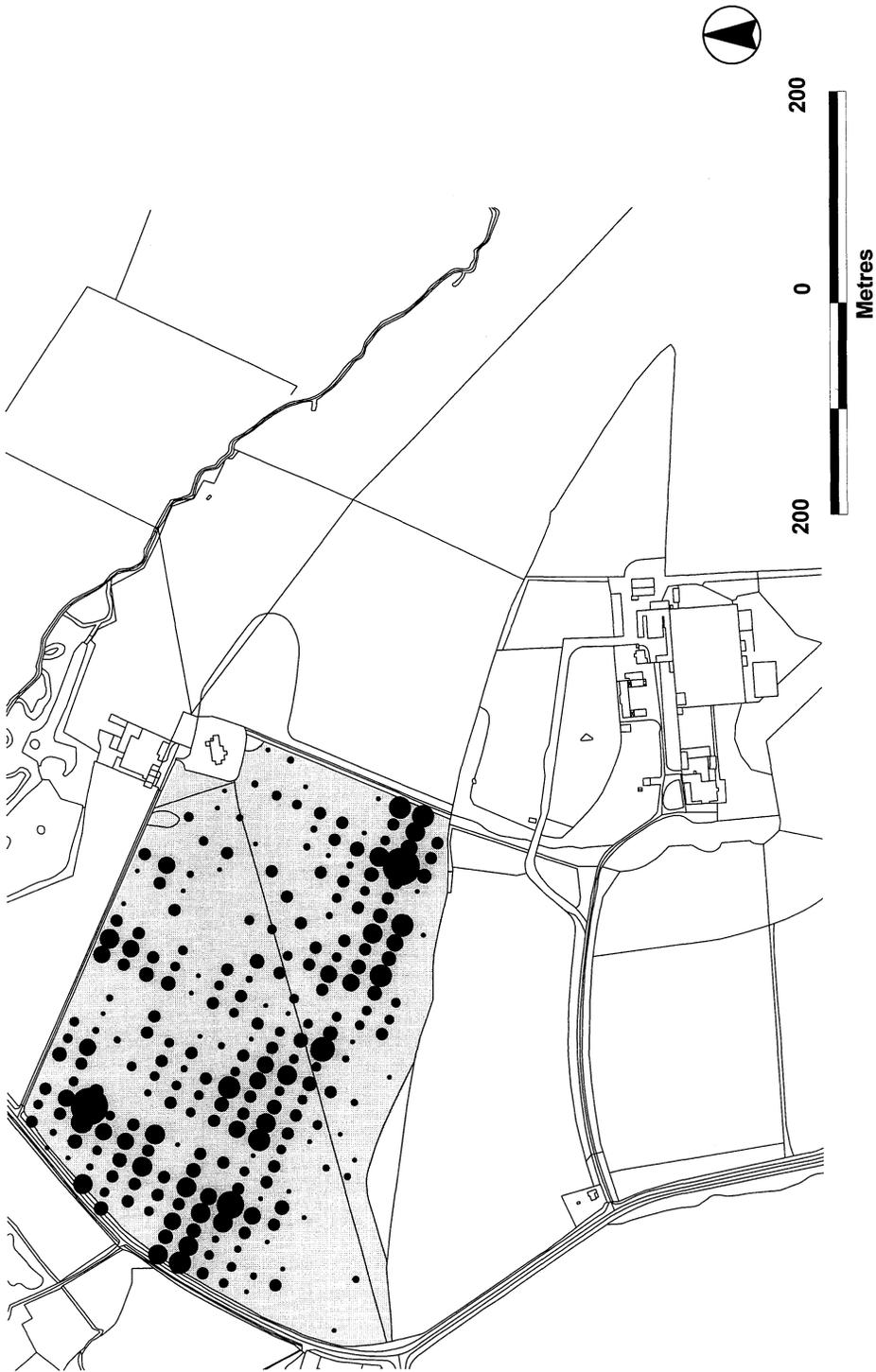


FIG. 8
Distribution of Late-medieval pottery in Lillingstone Dayrell (shaded areas surveyed).

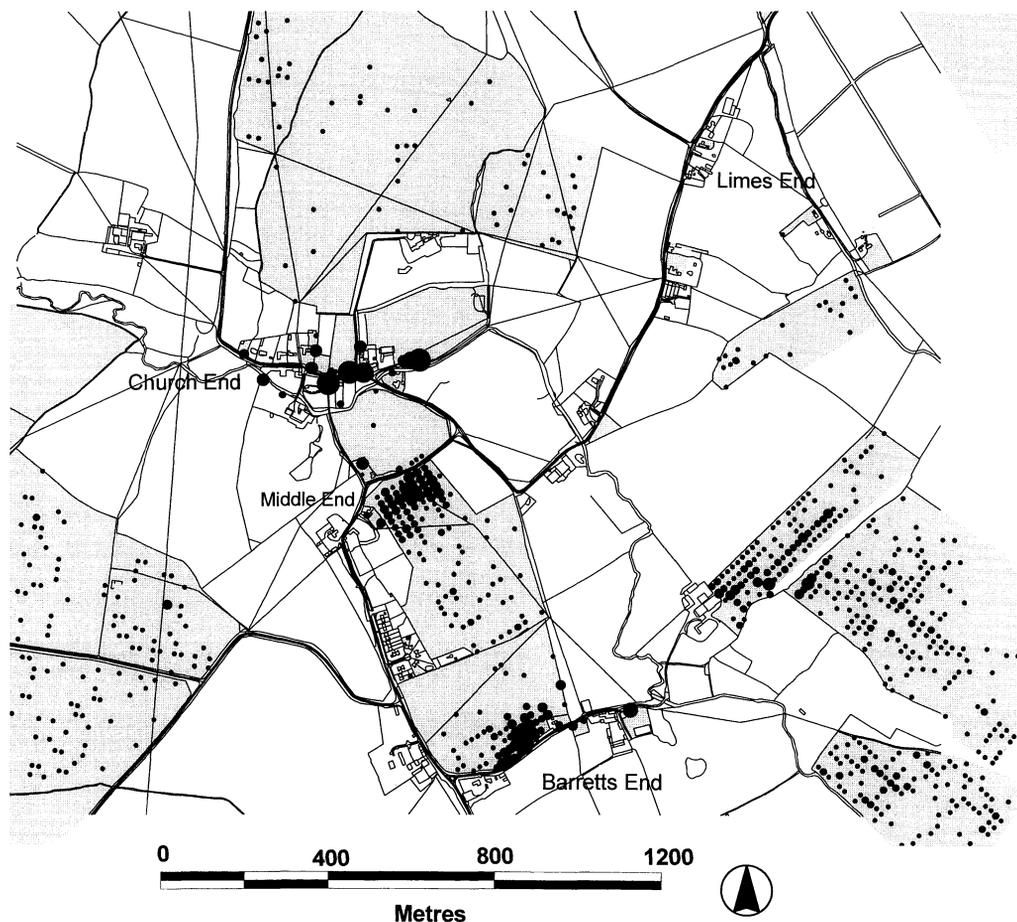


FIG. 9

Distribution of Late-medieval pottery in Leckhampstead (shaded areas surveyed).

of the more populous villages within the area throughout the later medieval period and this is mirrored by the scale of settlement.⁹² Just as at Lillingstone Dayrell, evidence has been forthcoming to suggest a possible foundation date for these dispersed parts of the village. Middle End, Barretts End and Limes End have all produced St Neots Wares in addition to early handmade wares (400–850). It would appear, therefore, that these separate ends have their origin before the 9th century, when dispersed settlements dominated. Far from coalescing to form a single nucleated settlement, this earlier pattern was retained throughout the later Saxon and into the post-Conquest period, with growth based on the initial cores. The suggested early date for all the parts of Leckhampstead might help to explain its dispersed morphology, very different from later foundations such as Lillingstone

⁹² The recorded population in 1086 was over 30 and in 1279 was 76.

Dayrell. Again it supports the idea that Leckhampstead held primacy over Akeley and may well have been one of the important nodes, like Passenham, from which the interior of Whittlewood was later colonized. As with Lillingstone Dayrell, no evidence of Roman occupation can be associated with the Saxon settlement patterns, although in both instances numerous Romano-British sites are known within the parishes.

At Akeley, by contrast, there is some evidence to suggest that the medieval settlement formed around a pre-medieval enclosure.⁹³ Roman pottery from test-pits located on the edge of the churchyard points to re-use of the enclosure. The church was clearly an important focus for settlement; nevertheless, far from being tightly clustered, negative evidence from test-pits has shown that large parts of the central area of the village remained unoccupied throughout the medieval period. Additional occupation sites, however, in the form of an interrupted row, can be shown to have developed to the south. In form, therefore, medieval Akeley appears to share characteristics in common with green-side settlements, its modern nucleated appearance only produced by post-medieval infilling. Late Saxon wares found close to the church indicate a foundation date no earlier than the 9th or 10th century, in line with the proposed expansion and colonization from Leckhampstead.

In Whittlebury, fieldwork and test-pitting have revealed the staged development of the village. Its early focus appears to have been a large oval enclosure, now occupied by the church to the north-east of its centre. Iron-age pottery and Ipswich ware (c. 725–800) have been found within the *burh*, from which the settlement presumably takes its name and which may have been the location of the council held in 930. To the east of this enclosure, settlement appears to have grown organically. Ceramic finds prove occupation here in the 11th and 12th centuries. The southern extension of the village along the main street can be dated from pottery evidence to no earlier than the mid- to late 13th century and may be seen as a planned expansion. In addition to the principal settlement, two dispersed medieval settlement elements are known — a small hamlet north-west of the village at Lady Nether End and a moated site at Lords Field Farm to the north. The chronology of their creation and desertion, however, cannot presently be fitted within the developmental stages proposed for the village with any precision. The history of Whittlebury perfectly demonstrates the complexity of development exhibited by many of the settlements within the project area, and warns against their typological classification from modern or 19th-century forms. The present-day nucleated nature of both Akeley and Whittlebury obscures their origins as dispersed settlements.

CONCLUSIONS

Studies of settlement form in the 19th century have pinpointed Whittlewood as an anomalous area, one in which both nucleated and dispersed settlements existed side by side. Thus, the maps prepared by Roberts and Wrathmell show

⁹³ For a fuller account of the evidence from Akeley and Whittlebury, see Jones and Page, *op. cit.* in note 8, 15–25.

Whittlewood to have been an island of relatively dispersed settlement in a sea of nucleated villages.⁹⁴ The reverse perspective is offered by the authors of *Village, Hamlet and Field*, who have observed that 'dispersed settlement is generally common in woodland, although again Whittlewood is somewhat an exception, as its settlements were, in fact, quite mixed in form'.⁹⁵ In the 19th century, therefore, considerable numbers of regular row settlements and even one or two small clusters were found alongside more dispersed forms of settlement in the Whittlewood area.⁹⁶ This study shows why Whittlewood is neither typical of the champion area surrounding it or of other woodland areas in England. Its landscape and settlement pattern was forged in the Middle Ages as a result of a combination of factors.

In the Early Middle Ages, the Whittlewood area was lightly populated as a result of the post-Roman retreat from the claylands to the lighter soils, in areas such as around Brixworth to the north, and the Vale of Aylesbury to the south. This low level of population is reflected in Domesday Book, where it is combined with large amounts of woodland and limited areas of arable, compared with the surrounding areas of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. There is, too, more evidence of a pastoral economy, such as the large numbers of pigs which the Domesday woodland could support, and of industry, such as the smiths of Greens Norton who probably exploited the woodlands of Silverstone and Whittlebury. All this suggests a woodland *pays*, as can be found in other parts of England.

However, by the 12th and 13th centuries open fields were being worked and virgate holders were living in these woodland areas. This champion countryside may have developed later than the 'great replanning' of the 9th and 10th centuries, but was almost certainly influenced by it. There is little evidence for the abandonment of an earlier dispersed settlement pattern in the parishes of the project area during the process of nucleation. Instead the rather loose nucleations of the Whittlewood area are likely to reflect an original pattern of settlement which has evolved over time according to the size of the population to be accommodated but which has not been subject to any great replanning. This is because there was ample space within the territories of these settlements for there to be a reorganization of the landscape without any concomitant replanning of settlement. Thus open fields may well have been laid out in imitation of those created in more populous districts of the Midlands. The availability of space in this woodland environment is further indicated by the creation of secondary settlements, such as Puxley and Elm Green, when population reached its height.

Whittlewood thus becomes a hybrid or anomalous area at the time of the 'village moment', in the period between about 850 and 1200. Landowners within the project area, whose manors were created in the 10th and 11th centuries from the break up of 'multiple estates', like their counterparts elsewhere in the Midlands, were able to impose labour services on the peasantry of the area and create standard customary tenements of virgates and half-virgates. These were spread across open fields which were laid out, in some cases at least, before the Norman

⁹⁴ Roberts and Wrathmell, *op. cit.* in note 3, 2.

⁹⁵ Lewis, Mitchell-Fox and Dyer, *op. cit.* in note 5, 57.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

Conquest, perhaps at the time of, or a little later than, the 'great replanning'. However, Whittlewood remained a largely pastoral region, with limited arable resources, and with the potential for colonization of the woodland, the creation of smallholdings, and the resources to support a range of non-agricultural occupations. Many of these tenants held their land for relatively light services and were the ancestors of people who made their living from the timber and wood of the forest in later centuries.⁹⁷

The concept of *pays* has proved to be a useful and influential means of characterizing the historic landscape and settlement pattern of England. It takes into account a variety of social, economic and topographical features and thus comes close to representing the complexity of the landscape at different points in time. Moreover, it may be applied both to very large areas of the countryside as well as to smaller sub-sections of land. Nevertheless, there remain substantial parts of the country which do not fit easily into one of the broad categories of *pays*. Much of the Midlands is characterized as champion with smaller areas of woodland and wold. In this paper the medieval forest of Whittlewood has been considered in relation to these three types of *pays* and has been shown to possess features common to all, particularly champion and woodland. The explanation for this hybrid character lies in the fact that this was a heavily wooded region but one influenced by the settlements nearby which underwent a transformation in the period 850–1200 as nucleated villages formed and open fields were laid out over areas of previously dense, dispersed settlement. Whittlewood followed a similar path while at the same time preserving elements of an earlier settlement pattern and land use. The result was not a unique *pays* but a mix of others which, in one form or another, was probably replicated in other parts of Britain and even further afield.

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⁹⁷ J. E. Linnell, *Old Oak: The Story of a Forest Village* (London, 1932), 3.